ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1

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THE U.S. IN HONDURAS

MYSTERIOUS DEATH OF FR. CARNEY

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Last September 19 the Honduran armed forces staged an elaborate press conference in Nueva Palestina, a ramshackle jungle settlement in Olancho province, just thirty miles from the Nicaraguan border, to announce that its counter-insurgency forces had liquidated a ninety-six-strong guerrilla column. Killed at the head of the column the previous evening, according to Maj. Leonel Luque, commander of the army's task force, was José María Reyes Mata, Honduras's most celebrated Marxist. Reyes Mata's killing, which broke the back of the guerrilla resistance, brought the total of dead subversives to thirty-eight. Not all had died in battle; ten were said to have starved in the jungle after military intelligence detected them and the army cut off their food supply. Among the latter was a 58-year-old American Jesuit from St. Louis, the Rev. James Francis (Guadalupe) Carney. Laid out for the press to inspect, next to a formidable array of RPG-2 grenade launchers and M-60 heavy machine guns, were Carney's religious vestments, a wooden chalice and a Bible. The Honduran Army also produced three emaciated "deserters" to fill in the details of the by-now familiar Sandinista conspiracy.

The foreign journalists, shuttled into Nueva Palestina aboard army helicopters, were skeptical. For several weeks, armed forces commander Gen. Gustavo Alvarez Martínez had insisted on the existence of a Cuban-Nicaraguan conspiracy to infiltrate his country with 3,000 armed terrorists, but the few journalists who nosed around in Olancho found no evidence of a guerrilla presence. Other troubling questions remained. Why was Reyes Mata's body not produced for the Honduran tabloids, which clamor incessantly for corpses? And what of Father Carney? Where were the witnesses to his death?

The first person to comment on the missing facts was the soft-spoken Superior of the Jesuits in Honduras, the Spanish-born Rev. José María (Chema) Tojeira, whose doubts coincided with those of the Carney family in the United States. The family began an investigation, making two trips to Honduras and keeping up a stream of telephone calls and letters to the State Department. They grew restive, however, at the reluctance of American officials to challenge the Honduran military's version of the events. After his first trip to Tegucigalpa, Carney's brother-in-law, St. Louis psychologist Joe Connolly, confided to us, "I think there is a real chance that the United States is up to its neck in this."

Our investigation leads us to believe that Connolly's fears were well founded. There is compelling evidence that U.S. officials played along with an elaborate Honduran cover-up of the facts. Worse, there are strong suggestions that U.S. intelligence and military personnel took part in the Honduran combat operations and may have been present when Father Carney died.

Father Carney's family had learned to live with the possibility of his death. He had spoken often enough of its likelihood and was the first to admit that his direct and plain-spoken attachment to liberation theology had won him few friends among either the Catholic hierarchy or the Honduran military.

His first Honduran parish, in 1964, was the run-down banana and railroad town of El Progreso, one of those mockingly named outposts that abound in Central America. He lived with an austerity that startled even his Jesuit superiors, leading one fellow missionary to recall that working with Carney "was like being with Jesus Christ." For fifteen years Carney defied the military. He worked with the national peasant union, ANACH, until 1979, when the military regime decided it had had enough, stripped him of the Honduran citizenship he had acquired in 1973 and threw him out of the country. Carney wound up in revolutionary Nicaragua, where he worked closely with the Maryknoll Sisters and became parish priest of San Juan de Limay; but he fretted about getting back to Honduras, which he continued to regard as home.

Eventually Carney found a way to return—as unofficial chaplain on a mission of the Revolutionary Party of Central American Workers-Honduras (PRTC-H). In the alphabet soup of Central American rebel groups it was relatively small and obscure, but in Honduras, even a small group can make a splash. By early 1983, José María Reyes Mata was in Managua as supreme commander of the PRTC-H, planning to drive a column into eastern Honduras and form a base of peasant support to start the Honduran revolution. As PRTC-H propaganda made clear, the rebels would have to contend with four armies—the Honduran, the Salvadoran (receiving U.S. training at Puerto Castilla, Honduras), the American and the *contra*. It was a bizarre and hapless exercise for just ninety-six men.

The 40-year-old Reyes Mata had fought with Che Guevara's National Liberation Army in Bolivia, which made him a minor legend to some Central American leftists, an outdated crank to others. As a strategist, he still had one foot planted in the *foquismo* of the 1960s, a theory which

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